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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an alternative hypothesis for the vitality of traditional understandings of teaching. Teachers' strength might be attributed less to the context of their transmission than to their continuing potential for translation as not-yet-completed narratives. The data were generated during the course of a project which elicited accounts from Jewish day school teachers about their lives and work. The paper offers a portrait of a teacher whose narrative not only bears a strong resemblance to what is characterized as an archetype of the teacher-as-Rebbe, but also articulates a significant transformation of that archetype in terms of the gender of its ideal type and in its understanding of the teacher's role in someone else's curriculum. In making evident that traditions of teaching remain vital by generating new literatures of practice, this case points to the appropriateness of pursuing an approach to teacher professionalization founded on a dialectic encounter between the constructions of theory and the embedded knowledge of teachers. This study suggests why a project to professionalize teachers, which until now has shown little evidence of attending to the traditions within which teachers' lives are embedded, will remain flawed until it attempts to understand what teachers and others who work in Jewish schools understand teacher professionalism to be. (Contains 32 references.) (SM)

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The teacher as *Rebbe*: Examining the persistence of inherited traditions of teacher professionalism as 'not-yet-completed narrative'

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Abstract

Although research has consistently shown that culturally embedded archetypes of teaching powerfully shape the ways teachers conceive of their work and lives, it remains unclear why or how these archetypes continue to exert such influence. Their tenacity has variously been attributed to the power held by those who articulate them, to their context within larger social traditions, and to their tacit character.

This paper explores an alternative hypothesis for the vitality of traditional understandings of teaching. It argues that their strength might be attributed less to the context of their transmission than to their continuing potential for translation as, what MacIntyre calls, not-yet-completed narratives.

The data on which this argument is based was generated during the course of a project which elicited accounts from Jewish day school teachers about their lives and work. A portait is offered of a teacher whose narrative not only bears a strong resemblance to what we characterize as an archetype of the teacher-as-*Rebbe*, it also seems to articulate a significant transformation of that archetype in terms of the gender of its ideal type and in its understanding of the teacher's role in someone else's curriculum.

In making evident that traditions of teaching remain vital by generating new literatures of practice, this case points to the appropriateness of pursuing an approach to teacher professionalization founded on a dialectic encounter between the constructions of theory and the embedded knowledge of teachers.

Theoretical background

It is almost axiomatic that teachers' professional identities are rooted in the gendered and culturally constructed nature of their personal experience (Lortie 1975, Britzman 1986, Ben Peretz 1995, Connelly and Clandinin 1988). Research has consistently shown that culturally embedded archetypes, inherited images, and traditions of teaching powerfully shape the ways in which teachers conceive of their work and lives, their roles and responsibilities (Cole and Knowles 1994, Weber and Mitchell 1995, Sugrue 1996, Holt-Reynolds 1992).

While the strength of the traditions through which particular practices of teaching are transmitted cannot be in doubt, it is not clear why or how they continue to exert such influence. Their tenacity has variously been attributed to the power held by those who articulate them (Giroux 1981, Mead 1962), to their context within larger social traditions (Goodson 1992), and to their tacit character, embedded in language and hidden from view (Bullough 1991). In short, the strength of such traditional understandings of teaching has been ascribed to attributes within their transmission; in terms of their origins, the contexts in which they are transmitted, by which agents and how.

This paper explores an alternative hypothesis for the vitality (or what for some might be the stubborn persistence) of traditional understandings of teaching and professional practice. It seeks to determine whether the strength of such traditions might be attributed less to the power or context of their transmission than to their continuing potential for translation and (to adapt an argument from Elbaz (1990, p.22)) their capacity to generate valid understandings of present school culture.

This line of enquiry is predicated on an argument which MacIntyre (1985) develops in explaining why some moral traditions decay, disintegrate and disappear while others are sustained and strengthened. He suggests that a living tradition - a tradition which is vital - embodies continuities of conflict; it constitutes an historically extended, socially embodied argument (p.222). It possesses strength not, as conservative theorists have argued, because it is beyond reasoned critique or conflict (p.221), but rather because it continues a not-yet-completed narrative. If a tradition does founder it is only occasionally because an encounter with a rival tradition has provided good reasons for deserting it. Traditions rarely triumph in competition with one another, for frequently the positions on which

they are established are incommensurable.(p.276). It might be said, instead, (to use a conception developed by Rosenak (1995) following Peters and Oakeshott) that the vitality or decay of traditions has more to do with the extent to which the language of tradition is capable of developing new literatures, where language refers to a tradition's 'basic assumptions, problems, aspirations and understandings' and literature refers to 'what those who know and use the language do when they communicate and create within it' (pp.18-19).

In this case we want to examine whether the persistence of traditional understandings of teaching might be understood as much in terms of their narrative content as in terms of the socio-political context of their transmission. We want to determine whether the vitality they display might be attributed to the richness with which they are capable of being translated as much as to the circumstances within which they are transmitted. In short, we are proposing that the power with which inherited traditions shape the way teachers conceive of their work may be as usefully understood within a study of narrative developing as of cultural politics being transacted.

Research context

The study described here takes place within a context provided by the Jewish day school system. This is one of the primary frameworks within which formal Jewish education is conducted in North America, and it is one which, over the last decade, has been subject to an accumulating rhetoric of teacher professionalization. A series of high profile Jewish community commissions (inspired by similar bodies in the world of public education) have identified the avocational nature and underdeveloped professionality of the Jewish teaching profession as a 'critical impediment' to the provision of a Jewish education capable of encouraging a large segment of the Jewish population to define its future in terms of Jewish values and behaviour (Commission on Jewish Education in North America 1990, Jewish Educational Development Trust 1992).

Implicitly, this professionalization project reacts against what may be the oldest and most powerful archetype of Jewish teaching. For, in proposing to build a profession of Jewish education by investing in the development of clearly defined professional standards, establishing higher levels of training and creating a network of collegial support, this programme seems to challenge a venerable

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Jewish tradition of teaching which is predicated on the personality rather than the professionality of the teacher. It challenges a model of teaching in which, as Holtz and Rauch (1988) describe it, the teacher-as-*Rebbe* is someone whose very presence and behaviour embody value, whose life is the text which he teaches, (the teacher is always male in this model), and who therefore makes his life always available to students. It is a tradition in which the teacher's aptitude is not only contingent on proficiency in subject matter and pedagogy but on questions of character and Jewish behaviour, and in which the student's success depends as much on study of the teacher as of the Torah text.

As will be obvious, a model which so much emphasises the personal and largely private virtues of the teacher is potentially most problematic, and in recent years it has been as much caricatured as canonized in memoirs and fictional writing (Scholem 1980, Scheffler 1995, Potok 1967, Roth 1993). It is a tradition which seems as likely to leave students inspired as scarred. And yet it seems that this teaching tradition displays remarkable tenacity within the Jewish day school system, even in the face of powerfully articulated alternatives. Gamoran et al (1997) indicate that more than 40% of day school teachers in the American Jewish communities they studied have been appointed on avocational rather than professional grounds. Less reliably, it appears also from the situations vacant pages of North America's Jewish press that when Orthodox day schools seek to hire new principals or teachers they continue to value rabbinic ordination (and its associated avocational characteristics) as highly as professional educational qualifications.

As we indicated previously, it is tempting to attribute the tenacity of a tradition such as this to attributes within its transmission. We could point, for example, to the power held by those who articulate it; in this case, the *yeshivah* elites who continue to shape assumptions, even among those who move far from their circles, about what constitutes authentic Jewish teaching and learning (Wertheimer 1989). We could point to the inseparability of this tradition of teaching from 'larger social traditions' in which Jewish education, or to be more precise, the study of Torah, its quintessential act, possesses value at one level as the realization of a divine commandment, on another as a means of ensuring and enriching spiritual existence and on yet another as a metaphysical factor supporting and sustaining the very existence of creation (Lichtenstein 1988). We could also ascribe the tenacity of this tradition to its 'tacit character, embedded in language, and hidden from

view'. In this way, the tradition may be sustained, on the one hand, by the tendency of many who work in community Jewish day schools to conceive of Jewish studies as 'limmudei kodesh' (holy study), or, on the other hand, by what appears to be a widespread perception (among students and parents) that Jewish studies is often taught in day schools within a Hebrew language immersion programme, not so much for sound educational reasons but because of Hebrew's status as a language of special theological character. In both cases, these tendencies implicitly generate a set of expectations that Jewish studies teachers should somehow be different or act differently from other teachers.

The study

Here we offer an alternative suggestion for the vitality of this tradition of teaching. The data on which our argument is based was generated during the course of a project which sought to elicit accounts composed by those who teach in Jewish day schools about their lives and work. Working within a theoretical frame established by Goodson (1992), Noddings and Witherell (1991), and Schubert and Ayers (1992), this story-gathering work was moved by an attempt to attend to teachers as sources of insight about teaching, as well as to understand their professional experience by using narrative forms which might convey the essences of teaching. The research procedure was modelled on the work of Jalongo and Isenberg (1995), Connelly and Clandinin (1988), and Holly (1989) in which journal writing was used in association with open-ended elaborative interviews so as to elicit teachers' stories, insights and knowledge. In this study, we worked with nine teachers from Jewish day schools in Canada and England who kept diaries over the course of an academic year and who met every six weeks with a member of the research team so as to elaborate further on their accounts.

The primary objective of this work was to generate accounts which might serve - perhaps independently of one another - as significant sources of insight into Jewish education, and until now in reporting on this work we have focused our discussion around questions related to the utility and validity of these accounts when conceived in this way (Pomson 1998). However, in this context we want to attend to another dimension of the study. For having provided teachers with an opportunity to talk and write all year about what it is they do, what has happened to them and what is important to them, we have found that a small number of participants have written about their experiences with

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a consistency and coherence which suggests that their professional practice, as they make sense of it, is rooted within a distinct(ive) normative context, that is, it is rooted within particular traditions of Jewish teaching.

We will offer a portrait (an interpreted montage) of one teacher whose journal is especially striking in this respect. For, as this teacher elaborates on her relationship with her students, her difficulties with substitute teachers, her sense of her responsibilities outside school and her disagreements with the principal, her writing seems to be shaped by a conception of teaching which bears a strong resemblance to the archetype of the teacher-as-*Rebbe* we previously described. At the same time, it also seems to articulate a significant, and largely unexpected, transformation of that archetype, for example, in the gender of its ideal type and in its understanding of the teacher's role in someone else's curriculum. In short, it seems to make evident in notable fashion the way in which traditions of teaching remain vital by generating new literatures of professional practice.

Shifra

We will refer to the teacher in question as Shifra. She came to her present modern-orthodox day school more than 7 years ago, with a masters degree in educational psychology, a strong Judaica background and more than 5 years teaching experience in a Jewish day school in another city. She was appointed by the school's previous principal, a person towards whom she feels deep loyalty for "having taken a chance on her". In fact, it was this last principal who invited her to take part in this project. At the time of the study Shifra taught Jewish studies in grades 1 and 3.

A teacher's name

One of the most immediately noticeable things about Shifra is the name by which she is known in school. One would have expected Shifra's students to refer to her as *Morah* Shifra or *Geveret* Cohen, since these are stock formulas much like Miss Julie of Mrs. Hopkins by which all the other female teachers in the school are known. (The male teachers are known as Rabbi G. or *Mar* (Mr.) L., equally standard designations for Jewish studies teachers in an orthodox school in which Jewish studies classes are conducted in Hebrew.) Shifra, however, is known among students and parents simply as *Morah*, a term, which literally means 'teacher' (f). Her first name or family name are rarely heard.

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This is most unusual practice and it demands some commentary for it seems to signal that Shifra possesses special status in the school. On one level, the title *Morah* might be regarded as a term of affection, capturing the warmth which, as Shifra's journal conveys, she and her students evidently feel for one another - what at one point she calls "the hugs and loving". On another level, this designation seems also to be a profoundly respectful term. It, perhaps, conveys the kind of regard shown to those rare male teachers whose personal and professional qualities so much intersect that they are known only as *Rebbe*. In such cases, no (distinctive) personal name is necessary, for in the eyes of their students these people are what they teach.

In an orthodox school such as this, it is inconceivable that there would be a female *Rebbe*, (this archetype has been a male one for more than 2000 years), even if, in these untraditional times, most Jewish studies teachers are women. Nevertheless, it appears that by calling her *Morah*, Shifra's students have found a way of signalling their recognition of the special virtues they see in her. By creating a distinctive designation such as this, they have found a way of preserving reverence for a traditional male archetype of teaching while acknowledging if not accelerating its transformation. Indeed, in many ways, the title *Morah* serves as a fitting symbol of the mix of continuity and change which Shifra herself has woven within her own professional life.

Creating curriculum

As Neusner (1970) implies, in a traditional context, the *Rebbe* creates curriculum out of the interaction between student, teacher and text. Teaching is not a matter of implementing or enacting a set of formal curriculum guidelines. It is radically unpredictable, contingent more on context and character than on content. This may explain why, for Shifra, some of the severest challenges in this year of journal writing came from having to wrestle with the introduction of a new Hebrew language curriculum into the school - someone else's curriculum. This programme, which places emphasis on oral rather than textual Hebrew, was introduced against her own recommendation but with the support of the school's new principal. It led her to express frequent concern about how well she was doing her job, or to be precise, about the kinds of Jewish knowledge she would have the opportunity to make available to her students.

Towards the end of December she confessed in her journal:

> "The programme is progressing - slowly - but the children are reading. Nevertheless, I have taught the laws of Chanukah in English - as I've always done. I will not sacrifice content for *Ivrit* (Hebrew language) and have my students go home singing only songs for Chanukah. I'm not a mere language teacher. That is why I was hired, that is what I will continue to do and it is what I believe in".

Here is evidence that Shifra has been prepared - albeit grudgingly - to work with the new curriculum. She is even ready to acknowledge that it has seen some success. Yet, when this curriculum comes into conflict with the content of her own personal curriculum, she is not prepared to negotiate any further , for in her view this would make it impossible to teach with integrity. It would require her to abandon a deeply rooted teaching ideal.

In a journal entry from mid-January, Shifra provided a powerful statement of what some of the content of her own personal curriculum might be:

> "A mother came over to me and told me her child said he loves *Chumash* (Bible) the best of all subjects, because *Morah* makes it so interesting and exciting. I answered - that is my goal - to give every one of my *talmidim* (students) a love of who we are - a sense of the beauty of our history and heritage, and a *hitlahavut* (enthusiasm) to learn further and grow in Torah and *mitzvot*. The *saphah* (language) will come - but the spark must be ignited."

For Shifra, there is special content to her classes which goes beyond and occasionally clashes with the formal requirements of the curriculum. This emerges from something central in her own life which she seeks to share with her students. As she indicates, for her, teaching is inspirational and relational. It involves working with texts and technical skills, in line with curriculum demands, but it has much greater significance. Teaching *limmudei kodesh*, even in grades 1 and 3, is about transforming the students' sense of who they are as Jews as well as of the kinds of Jews they might be.

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This means that in Shifra's personal curriculum indicators of learning do not show up only in formally required tests, although these have their uses. Instead, she looks for certain kinds of student responses: in the *kavanah* (intent) they invest in prayer, in their joy at working out a Rashi (a Torah commentary) and in their excitement to make a start on the next Torah portion when there are only 10 minutes of the lesson left. As she explained in conversation, "it is what [can be seen] in the students' eyes... in their enthusiasm... and in their excitement for who we are".

It seems as if Shifra has been able to fill a curriculum which is not her own with personal significance by drawing on a set of traditional understandings about the character of teaching and learning. While these understandings may not exist in direct opposition to anything the school may expect from her, they do presume a different set of curriculum priorities. This places her in a state of permanent tension as she endeavours to give expression to an understanding of professional practice which is not in harmony with the culture of the school in which she works. Periodically, when this tension is felt most acutely, it results in moments of crisis.

Professional knowledge

Because so much of Shifra's teaching is contingent on who she is, it leads to special difficulties on those occasions when she is unable to go into school. Thus, during May, she wrote:

> "I've been home ill - pulled out my back. I'm rarely absent and I feel the children lose out when I'm not there. Yet, I must learn to "give up" a little and realize that the children will gain without me (although perhaps not what I would wish). The place won't fall apart. Yet, a substitute can never replace the teacher. I never give a substitute *Chumash*. I feel that they cannot teach it as I would. So I give only *saphah* (Hebrew language). That's what I trust them with.".

Arguably, the issue here does not simply revolve around Shifra's scepticism (like that of many teachers) about what the substitute might achieve in her absence, but rather around what constitutes professional knowledge. From Shifra's point of view, teaching *Chumash* is not only about knowing the text, it is about who she is and the relationships she forms with the text as well as with those who

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study it. The substitute may know the text but she cannot know the students, and if, as we have suggested, learning occurs in the space between teacher, students and text, it is unlikely that *Chumash* can be properly learned in her absence.

In Shifra's understanding of what it means to be a teacher, the personal and professional are entirely intertwined. She teaches what she is and is what she teaches. In the classroom, this means that pedagogical success is not only a matter of possessing subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge or any other part of what is commonly regarded as constituting a knowledge base for teaching. It means, instead, being a certain kind of person.

Outside the classroom this has implications too. As she explained on one occasion, when she and her colleagues go to synagogue, they tend to feel as if everyone is looking at them - "almost like movie stars". She admits, "it diminishes your privacy, but it does serve to drive you to become a more appropriate role model for students". This is not a comfortable experience, especially for someone committed to a traditional perspective in which such role models are expected to be male, but, putting it quite categorically, she asserts, "as a *kodesh* teacher that is what you want to be and do".

A teacher's responsibilities and relationships

This conception of teaching would place considerable strain on a teacher even in the most sympathetic of circumstances. In a context, in which parents and administrators subscribe to alternative and competing narratives of teaching, it becomes a difficult and delicate task. This was brought home forcefully following an incident in which a student was withdrawn from Shifra's class early in December so that she could join her brother in another school. It provoked what may have been some of the most poignant reflections in the journal. We will reproduce the passage in full:

> "A girl was pulled out of my class to another school because her older brother was not being motivated at our school. It's really not fair to the sister, but the parents didn't want the brother to go alone. The girl had her friends. She was very happy here.
>
> The mother came to me, saying how inspirational I was and how the child keeps talking about me - 'Morah' this and 'Morah' that.

> I felt that they did such an injustice to the child. She had such a thirst for knowledge in *limmudei kodesh* and it was taken away because of an older sibling. Could the child call me at home ? Yes.
> I can watch this decision and feel its wrong, but can say nothing. She is their child and it is their right to do as they feel best for their children.
> Yet, it hurts me. At first, I took it personally, (did they pull her out because of me - my teaching - my Ivrit ?) until I was reassured by the mother that the decision was purely because of the older sibling.".

There are many issues interwoven here. First, and painfully, there is a surfacing of Shifra's difficulty in adjusting to someone else's curriculum, with her presumption that she has failed because of her lack of emphasis on spoken Hebrew. It is not unexpected that she first blames herself for the student's withdrawal, for if teaching and learning depend so much on who she is, then what appears to be failure must be due in large part to something she has or has not done.

There is another kind of discomfort here too. In part it may be the pain of separation, but it also seems to be the pain of recognizing the limits of her own role in a context which is inhospitable to the performance of what for her are traditional teacher roles. This is a student, to use Shifra's own imagery, whose spark has been kindled, and who has developed a thirst for the special content of Shifra's teaching. Finally, though, this is only her student, and not her child. Her influence only goes so far, even if in her own judgement, the girl's parents do harm to their daughter. This is probably why she finds the situation so difficult. For, in traditional terms the teacher as R*ebbe* is a special kind of parent. As the Talmud expresses it, "he who teaches Torah to someone else's child is regarded as having given birth to them" (Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 19b). In a contemporary context, however, as a teacher who is a paid employee of a private Jewish day school there is little point in challenging the client's judgement. At best, Shifra can make herself available outside formal school time and thus draw on different dimensions of what she sees as her role. In this way she can adapt, but need not abandon her understanding of what it means to be a teacher. In a kind of twilight world, there is still room to remain faithful to her own sense of professionalism, even while this space has become highly circumscribed.

Conclusions and implications

We have drawn on extracts from Shifra's journal and from conversations with her so as to highlight the reworking of the language of tradition within a literature which is both authentic in terms of established understandings but also relevant to present school culture. As we have tried to suggest, Shifra may have created a distinctive professional narrative by reworking or adapting what is essentially a traditional archetype of teaching, but this does not mean that she is out of place in an untraditional school context. If her sense of professionalism is not in harmony with the culture of the school in which she works, it is not entirely out of tune with it.

It is worth emphasizing that Shifra is not and cannot act fully as a *Rebbe*. (Indeed, it is doubtful whether a male teacher could in this context either). Nevertheless, she has been able to develop a professional identity which has reworked significant aspects of the teacher-as-*Rebbe* archetype (an archetype which has been almost entirely male), in her relationship with students, in what she teaches and in how she sees her responsibilities.

As we have argued, it may be that this reworking of tradition has been vitiated by being able to draw on the rich cosmology of Jewish study within which it is rooted or that this tradition of teaching has been sustained by having been promoted by powerful institutions within the Jewish community. We would suggest, however, that it might be more helpful to view the persistence of the *Rebbe* archetype in this case less in terms of the circumstances of its transmission and more in terms of its character as a not-yet-completed narrative. In the first place, this may help act against the theoretical reification of inherited images, embedded archetypes and traditions which have been shown to shape powerfully the ways in which teachers conceive of their lives and work. A narrative perspective seems to emphasize that the vitality of such archetypes comes from their continuing and changing ability to bring meaning to teaching and learning.

This is no small matter, for as Elbaz (1990) has suggested, because traditional understandings frequently obstruct progressive programmes for the transformation of education, there is a temptation to see their persistence less as a result of their continuing potential for making meaning and more in

terms of the power of those who articulate them. From this standpoint, it is easy to view such traditions as fixed corpuses which are either uncritically inherited or thoughtfully disowned, rather than as viable and vital systems for making sense of teaching. As Shifra's case demonstrates, inherited understandings are neither fixed nor formal in their effect. They are shaped by teachers' practices as much as they, in turn, shape them, and their vitality derives as much from their continued capacity to be relevant as from any residual authority they may possess.

In related fashion, we would suggest that viewing the persistence of teaching traditions in terms of their evolving content rather than any enveloping context may have significant implications for how we conceive of processes of teacher professionalization. As we have seen, inherited understandings are established, tenacious and powerful. They are not easily modified through encounter with rival traditions of teaching. Yet, as we have tried to show, Shifra's remaking of some parts of a traditional teaching archetype has been no less signific*ant* than her preservation of other parts of it. From this perspective at least, it would appear that the tenacity of strong traditions derives as much from their capacity to undergo (some might say, absorb) change in certain limited ways as from their tendency to resist it. To draw on the categories we previously employed, it might be said that the power of inherited images comes in no small part from their capacity to generate new narratives and to create new 'literature' from within the 'language' of tradition.

Viewed in these terms, Shifra's case suggests, somewhat ironically, that progressive conceptions of teacher professionalism may be capable of replacing those which are embedded in established traditions, if their introduction is pursued in ways which are more dialectical than direct, if, that is, processes of teacher professionalization seek, first of all, to explore the narrative potential in prevailing teaching traditions. Programmes for teacher professionalization which begin from what Johnston (1992) calls a deficit view of participants' own knowledge will probably not easily transform prevailing understandings of teaching and teacher professionalism. Yet change might come about through an approach which is predicated on an encounter between the progressive constructions of theory and the embedded traditional knowledge of teachers, seeking to create theoretically defensible 'literatures' of teaching out of the 'language' of traditional understandings. This is perhaps why it may be more strategic, as Holt-Reynolds has suggested, for teacher educators

to organize their work around fostering the professionalization of existing rationales than around generating professional rationales and behaviours from scratch (1992, 344). It need not imply the privileging of tradition but suggests, at least, the wisdom of better understanding its content, if it is to be transformed.

In a Jewish educational context, this case offers one more implication. In the present, decade-long, drive for Jewish teacher professionalization, teachers have been somewhat marginalized, viewed as obstacles or at best as objects of the professionalization process. This case suggests why a project to professionalize teachers, which until now has shown little evidence of attending to the traditions within which teachers' lives are embedded, will remain flawed until it attempts to understand what teachers and others who work in Jewish schools understand teacher professionalism as being. It is not simply a strategic question of achieving the goals of professionalization by working more inclusively with those whose transformation is sought, it is to ask, more fundamentally, whether the goals of this project have been adequately grounded in the multiple possible meanings of Jewish teacher professionalism.

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